



How Japan Uses Sea Power as an Instrument of Statecraft to Shape the Regional Order

Paul Chamberlain

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Cover Photo: A scene from the Ship Rider Cooperation Program 2025 (Photo: Japan Ministry of Defense)

How Japan Uses Sea Power as an Instrument of Statecraft to Shape the Regional Order

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From the Editor

This publication is the result of a research project conducted by Mr. Paul Chamberlain at the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), while he was a NIDS Fellow from October 2025 through February 2026. As we think his study offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of the utility of sea power, we hereby publish it as an issue of the *NIDS Research & Analysis* series, to offer it for wider readership.

Editor in chief
KIKUCHI Shigeo

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Summary

Great-power competition dominates commentary on the Indo-Pacific regional order. Japan's role in the order is usually read as derivative of this contestation – as an alliance partner operating under constitutional constraints in a region shaped by Sino-American rivalry. This reading is too narrow. This article argues that Japan's accumulated use of sea power over the past decade has become part of the architecture of the order rather than merely derivative of it. Much of the regional maritime order is built through quieter practices: who trains with whom, which informational channels become routine, and which capabilities partners rely upon. Drawing upon English School and complexity-informed approaches to order, this article treats sea power as both practice and process. It identifies four specific clusters of sea power practice that influence the order: capacity-building, exercises, defence-industrial provision, and maritime governance. Together these practices form a distinctive model of sea power as an instrument of statecraft. The article thus makes the case for Japan's agency in shaping the Indo-Pacific strategic order through cumulative and sustained sea power practice.

Introduction

Great powers noisily contest the Indo-Pacific's strategic architecture in summit communiqués and carrier strike group deployments. But order at sea is also built through quieter, even whispered, routines: who trains whom, which norms become a default, which patrol vessels get financed and crewed, which exercise calendars partners plan around. Sea power is not just about ship numbers, tonnages, and missiles.¹ It can also be thought of as practice and a process. It encompasses the full spectrum of what states do in, on, and from the sea as an instrument of statecraft. This is a wide spectrum of activities from deployments, exercises, capacity-building, defence-industrial cooperation, governance initiatives, information-sharing, basing, and professional military education. This paper argues that these practices, sustained over time, become part of the architecture of the regional order. Therefore, they are not merely supportive of it, but constitutive.

The argument rests on a specific understanding of order. Following Bull, this paper treats international society and its institutions not as organisations but as patterned practices, a set of habits and practices shaped towards the realisation of common goals.² Goh extends this to the regional level: East Asian order is a negotiated hierarchy maintained through overlapping arrangements that states contest and reinforce simultaneously.³ Prantl and Goh's strategic diplomacy framework connects this to complexity thinking, showing how states can nudge the system through overlapping institutions and forums rather than grand designs. In other words, learning to harness complexity rather than be paralysed by it.⁴ They reconceptualise Meadows' leverage points as strategic entry points: places in the system where purposeful activity generates effects disproportionate to the scale of the intervention. This paper adapts that concept to the maritime domain by considering the following entry points: capacity-building; partnerships; procurement; and maritime governance.⁵ The paper makes a specific claim about agency in that non-great power states are not passive recipients of great-power competition but active shapers of how the order works, often through cumulative practice.⁶

Japan is a good case study to see this in action. In recent years it has assembled one of the most consequential repertoires of sea power practice in the Indo-Pacific. This paper examines four clusters of sea power practice undertaken by Japan: a capacity-building pipeline centred on the Philippines; an exercise complex spanning bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral formats; a defence-industrial programme anchored

1 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Little, Brown, 1890); Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Longmans, Green, 1911); Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 4th ed. (Routledge, 2018); Christian Le Mièr, *Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Drivers and Challenges* (Routledge, 2014).

2 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 4th ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 [1977]), esp. 8, 71.

3 Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 Jochen Prantl and Evelyn Goh, "Rethinking Strategy and Statecraft for the Twenty-First Century of Complexity: A Case for Strategic Diplomacy," *International Affairs* 98, no. 2 (2022): 443–69.

5 The four entry points adapt Prantl and Goh's strategic entry points concept to the maritime domain. Entry points are conceived as channels of influence rather than mutually exclusive categories; a single activity can engage multiple entry points simultaneously.

6 Goh, *Struggle for Order*, ch. 1.

by the Mogami frigate export to Australia; and a governance architecture built through institutions like ReCAAP (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia) and sustained anti-piracy deployments. Each cluster engages multiple entry points. Together they constitute a mode of sea power that may not look like statecraft but has become a fundamental part of how the regional maritime order works.

This range of sea power practice did not emerge from a single blueprint. It accumulated through domestic legal changes, institutional learning, and repeated operational practice. The 2009 anti-piracy law underwrote sustained far-seas deployments and a base in Djibouti.⁷ The 2014 collective self-defence decision and the 2015 security legislation widened the scope for what Japan could do with partners. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision gave these expanding activities a coherent external narrative.⁸ The combination of the 2022 National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program consolidated a more explicit posture on deterrence, defence industry, and partner capacity-building.⁹ Chinese grey-zone pressure created the demand signal from Southeast Asian partners and the political space within Japan for responding to it.¹⁰

1 Capacity-Building (Sea Power Practice Cluster #1)

Japan has been crucial in increasing the capability of the Philippines to protect its own maritime approaches. This has been centred on the provision of patrol vessels, training, and surveillance systems, notably through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)-funded Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), now in its third phase. Phase I (Loan Agreement PH-P257, signed 2013) financed ten 44-metre multi-role response vessels (MRRV). Phase II (PH-P263, signed 2016) financed two 97-metre vessels, which JICA described as the biggest vessels in the PCG's fleet. Phase III (loan agreement signed June 2024; Japanese ODA loan of up to ¥64,380 million) finances five additional 97-metre vessels, scheduled for delivery by 2028. In total, this pipeline has delivered or committed a substantial share of the PCG's offshore-capable patrol fleet and along with the physical vessels also brings a substantial sustainment tail of maintenance, training, and technical support. JICA itself describes its cooperation as combining 'hard and soft' support. This includes the technical assistance and training programmes, for example Japan Coast Guard (JCG) mobile cooperation teams. The result is a long-term relationship that is hard to replace quickly. Withdraw it, and the effect would be seen where it matters: on

7 Japan, Act on Punishment of and Measures against Acts of Piracy, Law No. 55 (2009); Japan, Cabinet Secretariat, "Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation," July 1, 2014; Japan, *Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security* (Government of Japan, October 2015); Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Development of Security Legislation," n.d.

8 Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific,'" 2023 (MOFA policy material).

9 Japan, *National Security Strategy* (Government of Japan, December 2022); Japan, *National Defense Strategy* (Government of Japan, December 2022); Japan, *Defense Buildup Program* (Government of Japan, December 2022) (official English versions).

10 Evelyn Goh, "Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 614–44.



A patrol vessel Japan provided to the Philippines (Photo: EPA=Jiji)

patrol days at-sea and readiness, leading to less endurance at the cutting edge of enforcement.¹¹

An extra layer on top of this patrol vessel provision is Official Security Assistance (OSA), a grant mechanism distinct from Official Development Assistance (ODA) that channels surveillance and maritime security equipment directly to partner forces. OSA is run not by the Ministry of Defense, but rather the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The programme began in FY2023 at roughly ¥2 billion and expanded in FY2024. OSA briefing materials describe projects agreed and exchanged through diplomatic notes, such as coastal radar and related systems for the Philippines. The OSA budget rose from approximately ¥2 billion in FY2023 to ¥5 billion in FY2024, ¥8.1 billion in FY2025, with an increase promised to ¥18.1 billion in FY2026.¹² MOFA also describes the programme expanding from four recipient countries in FY2023 to eight in FY2024. OSA represents the formalisation of what the capacity-building repertoire has been doing informally for years: converting development finance into security provision, blurring the line between aid and strategic investment in partner enforcement capacity.

This cluster of sea power capacity-building from Japan to the Philippines is dense and growing. Bilateral exercises are layered with repeated Maritime Cooperative Activities (MCAs) with the Philippines

11 Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), *Ex-Ante Evaluation (Japanese ODA Loan): Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard*, PH-P257 (JICA, 2013); JICA, *Ex-Ante Evaluation (Japanese ODA Loan): Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard (II)*, PH-P263 (JICA, 2016); JICA, “Signing of Japanese ODA Loan Agreement with the Republic of the Philippines: Further Strengthening the Maritime Safety Capacity of the Philippine Coast Guard,” press release, June 11, 2024; Philippines, Department of Finance, “Loan Agreement Signing Ceremony of the Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project for the Philippine Coast Guard (Phase III),” 2024; Philippine Coast Guard, commissioning announcement for BRP *Teresa Magbanua* (MRRV-9701), May 2022; JICA Philippines Office, “JICA Inks New Agreement with the Philippine Government for Maritime Safety Capability Improvement,” June 14, 2024.

12 Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Japan’s Initiative to Underpin International Peace and Stability through Official Security Assistance (OSA)* (MOFA briefing, 2024); Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Press Conference by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu,” December 23, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaikenite_000001_00085.html (OSA budget increased by ¥10 billion from ¥8.1 billion in FY2025 to ¥18.1 billion in FY2026).

and the United States and, at times, Australia.¹³ These are not symbolic port calls and the normal ‘naval diplomacy.’ They are serialised cooperation inside the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone and explicitly framed as a recurring cooperative activity. The Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) entered into force on 11 September 2025, converting emerging political alignment into operational reality by formalising access arrangements that had previously depended on ad hoc arrangements.¹⁴ If the reported transfer of Abukuma-class destroyer escorts proceeds, it would add a warship-grade capability layer to a relationship so far built around coast guard provision.¹⁵ This is a qualitative shift from enabling maritime law enforcement to contributing directly to naval capability.

If Japan withdrew this capacity provision the consequences would be obvious: the vessels would age and the required maintenance and training schedules would likely slip without financing diverted from other internal budget lines. Days on patrol and operational effectiveness would slow, falter, and, in time, fall away. This is where impact upon the regional order can be seen. The partner-side evidence is clear: the MRRVs remain critical to the PCG’s offshore reach. This is real sea power provision being absorbed into partner operational practice and being used to not only support the partner’s interests, but also to buttress Japan’s desired regional order.

Japan’s relationship with Vietnam is shallower, with exercises and coast guard cooperation without the same procurement dependence. Indonesia and Malaysia receive training and joint exercises but not the same structural programmes at the same level. The relationships with the Pacific Islands are at an early-stage with cooperation frameworks, initial ship rider programmes, OSA-eligible equipment, but this is too recent to show demonstrated effect. The variation matters: not all provision at all levels becomes important or can claim to be influencing the order. The idea of sea power activities as constitutive of the order is strongest where the sustained aggregation of the activity and the relationships it sustains is hardest to replace.

2 Partnerships and the Exercise Complex (Sea Power Practice Cluster #2)

By exercise complex we mean the organised array of maritime exercises that the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and JCG conduct with various partners and allies in the region. This provides a

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- 13 Australia, Department of Defence, “Australia–Japan–Philippines–United States Maritime Cooperative Activity,” joint statement, April 6, 2024; U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, “Japan, Philippines and United States Conduct Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity,” March 28, 2025.
 - 14 Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Exchange of Diplomatic Notes for Entry into Force of the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA),” August 12, 2025; Japan, Ministry of Defense, “First Application of Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement,” October 7, 2025.
 - 15 “Japan to Export Used Destroyers to Philippines to Deter China, Yomiuri Reports,” *Reuters*, July 6, 2025; John Eric Mendoza, “No Formal Offer Yet from Japan for Abukuma-Class Ships—Navy,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, February 10, 2026. Reuters reported a Japanese plan to transfer six Abukuma-class destroyer escorts to the Philippines, subject to Philippine inspection and further deliberation; by February 2026, however, the Philippine Navy stated that no formal Japanese offer had yet been made.



Naval vessels from India, Japan, Australia, and the US during Exercise Malabar 2022 (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Michael B. Jarmiolowski)

different ordering mechanism from the capacity-building pipeline. Whereas that produces material dependence seen through chains of training and supplies, the exercise architecture determines interoperability patterns. This impacts who can operate alongside whom, at what level of integration, and with what regularity. Should a key participant withdraw, the exercise calendar does not merely thin, it reorganises because the interoperability relationships built through repeated cycles have to be rebuilt or rerouted through different partners.

Japan is one of the most enthusiastic participants in maritime exercises in the Indo-Pacific. Yet simply assigning the word ‘participant’ does not paint the picture. In many exercise series, Japan is a convenor and standard-setter, ANNUALEX being an example.¹⁶ There is a clear tactical reason for naval exercises in that they routinise high-end interoperability. Official exercise descriptions note that Malabar began in 1992 as a bilateral India-US exercise and has since evolved to include Japan and Australia in a Quad construct. In the regional maritime exercise ecology, sustained participation is a form of embedding the practice – partners plan for it, capabilities are exercised in repeat cycles, and the exercise becomes part of the year’s rhythm for regional navies (whether they participate or not).¹⁷ Japan has participated in every Malabar iteration since it was expanded to the quadrilateral format and convenes ANNUALEX annually and plays a substantial part in setting the operational scenarios. Remove Japan and Malabar would be expected to contract to trilateral or bilateral format.

¹⁶ U.S. 7th Fleet, “Japan, U.S. Forces Begin Multilateral Exercise ANNUALEX 2025,” October 21, 2025; Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), ANNUALEX exercise release (participant list), n.d.

¹⁷ India, Ministry of Defence, Press Information Bureau, “Maritime Exercise Malabar 2024” (Curtain Raiser), October 5, 2024; India, Ministry of Defence, Press Information Bureau, press releases on Exercise Malabar (Quad-format iterations): November 16, 2020; October 10, 2021; August 9, 2022; August 14, 2023.

The Quad's maritime mechanisms add a distinct layer through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) which aims to share maritime domain awareness data and tools with partners. What this illustrates is another pathway to influencing the order through minilateral governance, creating information dependencies rather than platform dependencies. If partners come to rely on Quad-sourced information feeds as part of their operational picture, such a mechanism would produce a form of constitutive impact on the order distinct from the bilateral aid instruments of capacity-building. However, this remains prospective, not demonstrated.¹⁸

Likewise, Japan's participation in Talisman Sabre (Australia's flagship large-scale joint warfighting exercise with the United States, usually expanded to a multinational format) is important. Without Japan, the exercise would lose a major non-Five Eyes contributor, as well as the scale of Japan's participation and reliable continuity. Similarly, Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) exercises and tracking coordination in the Western Pacific would thin at the margins without Japan. The regional naval exercise calendar would require adjustment not because any single exercise is irreplaceable, but because the interoperability patterns built through repeated Japanese participation are embedded in how the order works.

An important recent exercise that also has implications for the order is Freedom Edge, the trilateral US-Japan-ROK exercise launched in 2024. It proceduralises cooperation that was politically difficult earlier in the decade. It remains early-stage, but the point is already visible in that the exercise moves trilateral alignment from leader-level intent to a recurring, multi-domain exercise plan with defined tactical content.¹⁹ Strategically, it has deterrence signalling significance and normalises this trilateral defence format, and these are order-level effects.

3

Procurement: The Mogami Programme (Sea Power Practice Cluster #3)

Australia's selection of the upgraded Mogami-class frigate as the preferred platform for its future general purpose frigate fleet is the clearest recent signal of Japan's emerging defence-industrial strategic line of effort.²⁰ The Australian Government has stated that the first three ships will be built in Japan, with the remainder to follow in Western Australia. Media reporting framed the deal at around A\$10 billion and described it as Japan's most significant defence export since relaxing export restrictions in 2014.²¹ The

18 White House, "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022," May 23, 2022 (announcing the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness); Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, "Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness," Quad Leaders' Summit resources page, 2023.

19 U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "First Execution of Multi-Domain Japan-ROK-U.S. Exercise Freedom Edge," June 27, 2024; U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "Japan-ROK-U.S. Conduct Second Exercise Freedom Edge," November 12, 2024.

20 Australia, Department of Defence, "Mogami-Class Frigate Selected for the Navy's New General Purpose Frigates," ministerial release, August 5, 2025, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2025-08-05/mogami-class-frigate-selected-navys-new-general-purpose-frigates> (selection as preferred platform; first three ships built in Japan; remainder to follow in Western Australia).

21 "Australia Awards Navy Frigate Contract to Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy," *Reuters*, August 4, 2025.



The ceremony signing the Memorandum of Cooperation on the Mogami procurement (Photo: Jiji)

implications for the order of this deal are not just a question of capability – it is industrial integration, interdependence of supply and sustainment, and the sheer strategic fact of Australia choosing a Japanese ship as a core surface combatant. As such, it is not a cold purchasing decision akin to buying a car and driving it from the lot. It is a long-duration relationship that locks Japan and Australia into an allied maritime force structure. Japanese officials had publicly pushed Mitsubishi's reliability record as part of the bid, linking industrial credibility to strategic choice.²² If it proceeds as planned, the programme binds Australian sustainment, training, and upgrade cycles to Japanese design decisions and supply chains across multiple decades. Any cancellation or change would require a wholesale change of direction for the already strained surface fleet programme of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN).

Crucially, the Mogami procurement is built upon over a decade of increasing defence ties between the two countries. Without this foundation, such a complex multi-year deep commitment would not be possible. For example, the Australia–Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement, which entered into force in August 2023, provides the legal architecture for the personnel exchanges and port access that a co-production programme of this scale requires.²³ However, Tsujihiro and Murano frame the deal as a gamble for both sides: Japan's shipbuilding capacity is already strained by its own procurement schedule, and Australia is hoping that technology transfer to its shipyard can be executed smoothly and without the delays that plagued previous programmes.²⁴ As a cluster of sea power practice, the mechanism influencing the order in Japan's interests

22 "Japan Clinches Landmark \$6.5 Billion Warship Deal with Australia," *Reuters*, August 4, 2025; Colin Clark, "Japan's Government Pushes Hard to Woo Aussies with Advanced Mogami Frigate," *Breaking Defense*, July 3, 2025.

23 Australia, Department of Defence, "Australia–Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement," entry into force, August 13, 2023; Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Exchange of Diplomatic Notes for the Entry into Force of the Japan–Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement," August 8, 2023.

24 Iku Tsujihiro and Masashi Murano, "Japan and Australia's Mogami Gamble: A New Role in a Taiwan Strait Contingency," Hudson Institute Japan, September 23, 2025.

is through path dependence that deepens with each hull delivered, each maintenance and update cycle completed, and each interoperability standard embedded in the Australian surface fleet.

4 Maritime Governance Architecture (Sea Power Practice Cluster #4)

ReCAAP is often viewed as a reporting centre but in practice it operates as a governance infrastructure for the order. The annual reports are not just incident summaries, they treat the Information Network System (IFN) and national focal points as the core reporting and verification channel, and they set how incident information is circulated and actioned across member states. For the impact of maritime governance on the order, the key point is not whether ReCAAP ‘stops’ piracy. It is that it standardises what counts as an incident, routinises reporting, and embeds a shared operating picture through repeated use.²⁵

This is where order becomes visible through examining a process rather than discrete incidents. A practical example is Australia’s own maritime security guidance in that its own piracy and armed robbery notice explicitly describes ReCAAP information-sharing arrangements, identifies the ReCAAP ISC as a reporting channel in Asia, and includes a flow diagram for incident reporting. That is how governance instruments become part of the operating routine: the workflow gets written into the paperwork that commercial and security actors actually use.²⁶

Japan’s regularised anti-piracy deployments to the Gulf of Aden since 2009 represent a different kind of influence upon the order. Such operational deployments stabilise the maritime order rather than embed partners through provision. That matters for how we might classify such things, in that the deployment is the empirical referent, but the mechanism affecting the order is one of damping (reducing bad behaviour in the system) and protection of the regime. When Japan deploys capacity-building teams to Southeast Asia or sends naval task groups through the South China Sea, the underlying credibility of those deployments rests partly on the demonstrated willingness to sustain far-seas operations continuously for over a decade. Therefore, the presence in Djibouti and the continued counter-piracy operations provide the basis for other work elsewhere.²⁷

25 Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), agreement text, entered into force September 4, 2006; ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC), *ReCAAP ISC Half Yearly Report 2024* (ReCAAP ISC, June 27, 2024), annex, “Flow Diagram on Procedure for Reporting Piracy and Armed Robbery Incidents against Ships in Asia.”

26 Australia, Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), “7/2015—Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships,” Marine Notice, n.d.

27 Japan, Ministry of Defense, “Mission of the JMSDF,” n.d. (anti-piracy operations off Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden since March 2009); Japan, Cabinet Secretariat, “Japan’s Actions against Piracy off the Coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden: Annual Report 2024,” March 2025; Japan, Ministry of Defense, “SDF Facility, Djibouti,” August 18, 2025.

Conclusion: Contemporary Japan and Sea Power

A conventional reading treats Japan as a naval power operating under constitutional constraint within a US-led alliance, in a region dominated by growing hegemonic rivalry. Therefore, Japan is important, but its importance is predominantly derivative of the order. The argument given in this paper points to something sharper. Japan is building the quiet infrastructure of maritime order – the platforms partners patrol with, the exercises they train through, and the governance channels that routinise reporting and coordination. This is not the ‘gunboat diplomacy’ of old. We can see consequences of Japan’s sea power activities upon the regional order in the way accumulated practice is embedded in regional routines through procurement dependencies, exercise architectures, governance workflows, and deployment schedules. Japan’s sea power is not just ships, it is statecraft.

Some aspects of Japan’s use of sea power might be termed provider-centric ordering. Japan’s contribution runs through what it provides: vessels, training, exercises, governance instruments, and normalised presence. It does not depend on coercion at sea; it depends on provision that partners build into their default way of doing things.

This provider mode has vulnerabilities. It is only as durable as Japan’s non-substitutability. South Korea, India, Australia, and the United States all provide maritime capacity to Southeast Asian partners. Partner governments have agency and can hedge against dependence. Provision can be accepted, but it can also be diluted or substituted. China’s own competitive maritime provision (alternative platforms, port infrastructure, coast guard capacity-building overtures to Southeast Asian partners) creates options that could weaken Japan’s influence upon the order.

Not all Japanese maritime activity is necessarily ‘order-building.’ One-off port visits or symbolic engagements may matter politically but do not usually create dependency or normalised operating procedures. The September 2024 JMSDF destroyer transit of the Taiwan Strait illustrates the boundary. A single passage through politically sensitive waterways that generated significant media and diplomatic attention but with no routinised follow-on and no standing commitment.²⁸ It was a positioning signal, not necessarily impactful on the order. The impact on order is where programmes repeat and where partners cannot easily replace what Japan is providing.

A question might be asked whether the sea power practices of Japan described here are independently Japanese or merely derivative of US alliance direction. Under an alliance-directed interpretation, Japanese activities would show US programmatic steering: US-authored training curricula, US conditionality on exercise participation, or US-designed operational concepts embedded in partner capacity-building. The evidence shows otherwise: the ODA pipeline runs through JICA and JCG institutions, not US security assistance channels; ANNUALEX has an important Japanese convening role; ReCAAP was largely a Japanese initiative; and the Mogami export was a Japanese defence-industrial decision. The US alliance

28 “Japan Destroyer Passes through Taiwan Strait for First Time, Newspaper Reports,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2024.

provides the enabling hierarchy but it does not dictate the content of what Japan does within it. Readings that privilege alliance management misread the full picture.

This paper argues that Japan's use of sea power is not simply a list of activities or just the normal 'things that navies do.' It is a mode of statecraft in which sustained capabilities, exercises, governance participation, and defence-industrial programmes become embedded in how the regional maritime order works. For scholars of sea power, the implication is that the capability-centric tradition misses most of what non-great powers actually do with sea power today and how it matters for order. A processual definition of sea power makes visible an entire register of sea power statecraft that tonnage metrics cannot capture. For scholars of regional order the implication is methodological: if order is constituted through practices, then studying order requires tracing the operational routines, procurement dependencies, and institutional flows through which it is maintained. It is not, therefore, all about the diplomatic agreements and security architectures that sit 'above' everyday life.

For Tokyo, the most consequential impact upon the order through the use of sea power instruments might not be what generates headlines but what generates dependencies such as the JICA pipeline, the coast guard training programmes, the OSA grants, the exercise calendars that partners plan around. Protecting these relatively unglamorous programmes matters more than announcing dramatic ones. For Washington and allied capitals, the implication is that assumptions of Japanese maritime activities solely being derivative of US strategy are wrong. Japan leads in some ways, funds and shapes enabling architecture, and increasingly drives a defence-industrial line of effort that allies will likely seek to integrate with. For the region, survey evidence suggests Japan's reputation carries a measurable trust component: the ISEAS State of Southeast Asia survey reports Japan as the most trusted major power in both 2024 and 2025, rising from 58.9 to 66.8 per cent.²⁹ However, the order is about more than trust. But trust lowers the political friction of capacity provision and makes sustained presence easier to accept.

None of the claims advanced here are guaranteed to continue. A fiscal crisis, a change of government, or political inattention could degrade Japan's use of sea power. The constitutional transformation enabling the far-seas repertoire rests on a political consensus that has held for a decade but is not permanent. Tracking these domestic preconditions alongside the external ordering effects is essential for any honest assessment of how Japan uses sea power. But the central finding stands: the use of sea power by Japan is not peripheral to the regional order or based only on operational warfighting concerns. In specific and demonstrable ways, it is a critical part of how the order works and is maintained, every single day. To maintain a regional order that is conducive to its strategic interests and makes real the promises of the FOIP vision, Japan must continue its use of sea power as a central part of its statecraft.

29 ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, April 2, 2024); ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, April 3, 2025).

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Paul Chamberlain is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University, completing a thesis on 'Sea Power as Statecraft in the Contemporary Indo-Pacific Order' that examines how Australia, Japan, and Singapore use sea power to shape strategic relationships and the regional order. He is a Research Fellow for Indo-Pacific Sea Power at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies (YCAPS) and a Fellow of the Conference of Defence Associations Institute (CDAI), Canada, and was recently a Visiting Research Fellow at the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) in Tokyo. He has over 15 years of experience with the Government of Canada, where he served as the first civilian Policy Advisor to the Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy and previously ran defence relations with Australia and Southeast Asia. He can be contacted at Paul.Chamberlain@anu.edu.au.

